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THE IMITATION OF JESUS

SHAILER MATHEWS
The University of Chicago

Among the really classic books of religion there is none dearer to the heart of the church than the *Imitation of Christ*. For centuries men have found in it inspiration to sacrifice and humility, and to severest self-examination. What man of us has not found in its pages merited rebuke for our pride, or well-deserved calls to shame for our selfishness, as it has bidden us think of the sufferings of Christ? He who has never come under its influence has missed something that would have made him more humble and more ambitious for purity of life.

Yet few of us are ready to say that in this noble work there is presented precisely the Christ of the gospels, or the type of life which an unbiased reading of the words of Jesus would suggest. Its asceticism is too prevailing; its standards of life are too much those of the monk; and its estimate of Jesus himself is too much swayed by a theology dominated by ideas of merit and mercantile substitution. A life formed along the lines which it described would be, after all, hardly that which the average man and woman could expect to live or, indeed, would want to live in our present world.

None the less, we, too, would imitate Christ. The most intimate question which we can ask ourselves is whether such imitation is possible or in any way realized in ourselves.

But what is it to imitate Jesus? It certainly is not to reproduce in the twentieth century just the items which went to make up his conduct in the first century. No one of us would think of dressing as he did or of eating and drinking and sleeping and wandering homeless up and down the country side without occupation, dependent upon the charity of others. Nor, however much such a condition might be demanded in individual cases, should we think that to imitate him meant to live a life of celibacy and of hostility to existing religious authority, or to die a martyr upon a cross. Such

matters, we are agreed, are at best but superficial. A man might reproduce the life of Jesus in them all and still be far from being Christ-like.

Indeed, so far do we sometimes go in our revolt against this conception of imitation as to deny that there should be any imitation whatsoever. Forgetting that Jesus calls his disciples friends rather than slaves, we are ready to be his slaves, but even as such we choose to live our own lives. However we may attempt to do only what he distinctly commands us, we want to be ourselves, individual. Imitation, we sometimes feel, carries with it a suggestion of hypocrisy.

It is a mistake, however, to set these two moods of individualism and imitation over against one another. They are not mutually exclusive. Paul was farthest possible from setting a premium upon hypocrisy when he urged men to imitate him as he imitated Jesus, and Jesus himself does not demand any abandonment of one's own individuality, be it weak or strong, in the effort to live at one with him and with the Father. Indeed, if there is anything that was striking in the training given his disciples by Jesus, it was his constant silence on uniformity and identity of action. Peter he never tried to make into John, and John he never tried to tame into Thomas. He met the philistine spirit of Philip with a rebuke, but he answered it in a way which left that matter-of-fact soul still true to himself, however loyal he might be to the search for the Father whom he should have seen revealed in the Master. And, indeed, this is perhaps the first lesson that Jesus would teach any man who takes him as a teacher: the realization of his own individuality.

The question, therefore, of the imitation of Jesus merges itself in the larger question of the acquisition of character. The Christian life does not begin with a denial or a suspicion of the elemental deliverances of ethics. The imitation which Jesus would have us undertake is not a duplication of his actions, but a reproduction of his life; that is to say, the taking of an attitude to God and to our fellows and to our world like that which he himself held to God and to man and to the world in which he himself lived. And deepest within that attitude is a trust in God as love, and, because of this trust, self-sacrificing service to our fellows.

To place Jesus in his world is to emphasize the freedom of his

spirit. Paradoxical as it sounds, he who would be most like Jesus will be most unlike him. The student is like Jesus, not when he abandons his study and turns teacher, but when he carries on his studies under the guidance of the same ideals and love and faith as were expressed in the words and life of Jesus. The same principle applies to the business man or any person who is living a normal and legitimate life.

But this is farthest possible from saying that the imitation of Jesus is simply the living of a religious life, or the following of abstract principles formulated apart from the living personality. If there is anything which our recent studies of man are teaching us, it is the power of imitation. The child learns more by being in contact with a strong and worthy personality than by any amount of good advice. There is no more discouraging effort than that which seeks to make men good by giving them information about duties. There is a contagion of example which must in the last analysis determine all educational methods. A growing personality is formed by those influences which come from his observation of another's life. He is the most effective teacher of conduct who himself is worthy of imitation. It is here that Plato and Socrates, with all their greatness, are inferior to Jesus. A man may assent to their teachings, may even endeavor to reproduce them in his conduct, but he gets no particular inspiration from the life of either Plato or Aristotle. Even Socrates himself does not appeal to our moral imagination in any such way as does Jesus. One hero is worth a thousand books on heroism.

For it is personality that everywhere inspires us to emulation. And it is the personality of Jesus that supplies the pedagogical need of someone to imitate. Here in very truth the members of the kingdom of God are like little children. They want a creed lived out in deeds and not merely expressed in words. To reduce Jesus simply to a group of truths is to destroy a large part of his influence. The mere sight of the self-sacrifices of Jesus and the appreciation of the actual, concrete life which he lived have always proved, and will continue to prove, more potent than his noblest words.

To a high degree the development of character through imitation is involuntary. It is hard to say just how or why a man grows to be

like another. It is equally difficult to discover by analysis the precise forces which go to create a Christian character. Does a man grow good because he chooses this or that principle of life? Possibly some men do, but for most of us character is the outgrowth of influences which, like the actinic rays of the sun, beat in upon us and give us health and vigor without our being conscious of their influence. And it is thus with Jesus. We imitate him almost involuntarily. The character which stands out on the pages of the gospel appeals to us and commands us more effectively than even his words. The unconscious response of our souls to him supplements our definite determination to adopt his principles. Religious meditation may be its agent, prayer may be its accompaniment, but the real man of Nazareth is, after all, our inspiration. We grow to be like him as we live with him. Bound up in the bundle of his life we are saved.

But to be merely passive is not to imitate. We must act as well as meditate. The narrow path does not lead to heaven through the hermit's cell, but through the market-place. We are not like Jesus until we are ready to follow over Calvary as well. And there is tremendous need of this sort of imitation of Jesus. We are in constant danger of mistaking respectability for goodness, legality for morality. We are in even greater danger of living a life which, however much its externals may be like those set by the real followers of Jesus, is at heart vulgar and materialistic and selfish. The very center of our lives ought to be like the Master. We need his trust in a heavenly Father, his supreme confidence that a human soul is worth more than any amount of wealth, his splendid optimism which, without any attempt at self-deception, refused to believe that the ultimate outcome of badness is the same as the ultimate outcome of goodness. And most of all do we need to be like Jesus in our valuation of life. He placed honor and love and faith above that success which most of us want. We need the same heroism. We are afraid of taking up our crosses and following him. We are looking about for Simons of Cyrene to carry them for us. But until we are ready to follow Jesus to the uttermost—to the garden and the cross—we are untrue to him and to ourselves and to our God.